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Rheem Theatre closes its doors: Will the phoenix rise up again?

By *Sophie Braccini*



From left: Leonard Pirkle, Linda Summers Pirkle, Edy Schwartz and Derek Zemrak were among more than 100 attendees at the final viewing of "Shape of Water" on Sunday night at the Rheem. Photo Andy Scheck

all her friends thanking Zemrak and Pirkle for putting their hearts and souls into the Rheem for the past eight years. Citizen of the Year Bobbie Preston summarized the general mood when she said that the closure was a huge blow to the community. Tom Frainier, CEO of Semifreddi's Bakery and huge supporter of the Rheem felt sad at losing Moraga's sole entertainment venue. And Paul James, a longtime Moraga resident, could not believe that the theater was closing and told Zemrak that he would participate in a citizen-led effort to salvage the venue.

The theater will stay intact for now, with all its equipment, but it is closed for the foreseeable future. Tom Schnurr, president of the Moraga Community Foundation, said that the board was sad to hear that the Rheem Theatre was going dark. MCF was created about two years ago with a primary goal to support community projects, including funding strategies to keep the theater open as a nonprofit. Schnurr confirmed that over the past year, the MCF has worked toward securing a long-term future for the theatre and that it still hopes that a viable solution can be reached that benefits the community as a whole.

Moraga Mayor Dave Trotter also came to the last showing. He said he feels optimistic a solution might be found with the property owner Mahesh Puri. While no one was willing to confirm anything, it seems that discussions with the owner have been going on for some time.

For months now Zemrak and Pirkle had a month-to-month lease with the theater's owner. Puri did not respond to a request for comment in time for this article.

Zemrak confirmed that he was not abandoning the town. He added that he would come back if the theater would become a community-owned nonprofit venue.

Over the past eight years, Zemrak and Pirkle made the Rheem a place for great movies, raised enough money to purchase digital projectors, created a film museum and a Hall of Fame, and held countless events, including a large portion of the California Independent Film Festival, at the venue. But Zemrak says that movie attendance never really took off at the theater, that the upkeep of the 60-year-old theater was very high and that labor costs also went up. Zemrak, who is a CPA, said that if anyone looked at the numbers from a purely financial perspective, that person would throw in the towel. For Zemrak, however, offering theater and movies to the community is a matter of love.

The film industry as a whole has been facing stagnation, if not a decline in movie attendance over the last 10 years. The Motion Picture Association of America reported in 2016 that the U.S./Canada box office revenue was \$11.4 billion, up 2 percent from \$11.1 billion in 2015, a relatively flat number since 2009. The preliminary numbers for 2017 show a decline both in terms of number of tickets sold and revenue. The number of movies released by major studios has sharply declined from 128 in 2006 to just 78 in 2017. The number of movie screens in the U.S. has stayed stable over the last six years. Independent theaters, often historical buildings, are developing ways to anchor urban and suburban neighborhoods and inventing creative public-private partnerships, seeking help through the National Park Service to renovate older venues.

The Rheem Theatre's lights went out for good on Sunday, Jan. 7. A fairly large number of residents came to the last evening and expressed their sorrow at seeing the only Moraga entertainment venue closed. Questions about whether the Moraga Community Foundation might be able to capitalize on these regrets and raise enough money to buy the theater, how much money it would need to purchase the venue, and whether the theater is even viable in the long run continue.

Derek Zemrak announced Jan. 3 that the Rheem Theatre would close on Jan. 7. He, with partner Leonard Pirkle and the large team of volunteers and employees, invested a wealth of imagination and passion to transform the old venue into a vibrant community gathering spot. But in the end, Zemrak said that it did not make sense to continue to personally sponsor the operations every month.

On Sunday night emotions ran high with final moviegoers. Resident Edy Schwartz, who has spent the last five years supporting the theater, sent a message to

Zemrak said that the Orinda Theatre that he is also operating with Pirkle is doing well and will continue to show blockbusters as well independent films. He plans to continue to run the CAIFF there and at the Castro in San Francisco in 2018.

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[back](#)

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